

PHIL EDWARDS

In 1457 King James 11 of Scotland declared that, “the futeball and golfe be utterly cried down and not to be used.” The reason? He didn't want his subjects distracted from archery practice which was vital to the defence of the realm. The first reference to golf in Australia was at Bothwell, Tasmania in the 1820's. Alexander Reid, a Scot, played using balls made of feathers pressed together into three pieces of bull's hide sewn together. Then in 1847 Irene Schmidt played at a course in the Flagstaff Gardens. Phil doesn't actually recall these events and thinks they were probably a bit before his time. However, he remembers just about every shot he has ever played and, unfortunately, all of the excruciating puns and jokes he has used over the years.

His first contact with golf came in 1937 when as a kid one of his playgrounds was Aikman's paddock, a dairy farm off Hopetoun Rd. It was just one of a number of locations the Club enjoyed in its nomadic existence in the first half of the 20th century. He wasn't swinging a club then but clearly remembers the primitive layout with the fenced greens to keep the cattle away.

At about 12 he played a few holes at a private club at Euroa. He started to take the game more seriously and in 1952 he joined Warragul using a set borrowed from Cath McGorlick, a very good player living at Drouin at the time. It wasn't unusual for Drouin players to belong to traditional rival, Warragul, because it wasn't until 1955 that our Club re-formed and found a permanent home at Matthew Bennett Park. Phil joined a few years after but still kept up his Warragul membership.

For him it was mainly a consequence of his education. Warragul was one of the few country towns offering six years of secondary schooling. Drouin didn't get its High School until 1956. Before that it had a Primary School that offered schooling to Second Form (Year 8). It was the norm to leave school at 14 and reflected a different attitude towards growing up. You were either an adult or a child. As a result “teenagers” weren't invented until the fifties. In Phil's case he was bright enough to pass the select entry exam to Warragul in Year 7 and then go on to finish his engineering degree in Melbourne before returning home. It did mean that many of his friends were located in Warragul so it was natural to belong to both clubs. Marriage in 1965 changed that. Even Phil found he couldn't be everywhere at once.

Phil has been a member for well over fifty years. More interestingly, he may well have played the very first round at Matthew Bennett Park. The Club has a scorecard of a competition played in September 1955 that has a certain P. Edwards. Off a handicap of 26, he returned a score of 116. The winner had 106 but the worst score was 181. This needs to be seen in perspective. There were only 9 holes, largely within the racecourse. If you have ever complained about less than perfect condition, you would be horrified with the conditions. With sandscrape greens, yabby holes, swamp, barely delineated fairways and plenty of sticks and bush, conditions were tough. 116 may well have been a reasonable score. Incidentally the same card also records a G. Austin also off a handicap of 26 but no score. Could it be because he hadn't paid his comp fees that day? Does that sound like Aussie?

Things certainly have changed since then. Gradually, extra holes were added until in 1963 we boasted a full eighteen holes with grass greens. A Clubhouse was constructed in 1967 which was extended in 1979. The eighties saw the purchase of nearly 200 acres on Fairway Drive and the extra nine holes were officially opened in 2002. In 2010 the refurbished Clubhouse was completed. Phil has seen it all. He was there at the beginning when it was almost a hand to mouth existence till today when we are operating a multi-million dollar business.

Phil's involvement has been constant but for many years restricted to the winter months. Tennis was always his priority and, either as an administrator or player, consumed his time. Unlike today, Golf in those days was largely a weekend event. If you worked Saturday morning, as many did, then

even completing a game before dark became a problem. Sunday was easier but then there was always church and the ritual working bees to interfere with this pleasure.

One of the effects was to emphasise the big events. The annual tournament was one. It always had large fields and attracted competitors from all over Gippsland. In return our players supported other Club's events. One year he teamed with Alma Pepperell, six times Lady Club Champion, to win the mixed foursomes. However you might be more interested in two stories Phil tells against himself. One tournament he hit off from the first tee which was located near where the Race Club rooms are. The ball ricocheted off a big gum tree to land behind the tee. The next shot hit the rails of the race course mounting yards. His third shot was a nine iron over the fence. Three hits and he had hardly made a start. The next year on the same hole his drive landed on the full in the ladies toilet located near the present Club House. Fortunately it was unoccupied at the time.

There was plenty of serious stuff as well. In 1970 Stuart Pepperell, Alma's son, won the Club Championship. In those days there were two rounds of stroke followed by matchplay. At the end of the stroke rounds Phil was eighth. In the semi-final, Phil finished birdie, par and par. It wasn't good enough. Stuart finished par, birdie and birdie. Admittedly on the last Stuart mishit his second shot along the ground but was close enough to sink the birdie putt. Later, when members offered their commiserations, Phil was firm in saying he had no regrets. In sport you have to accept defeat. Stuart had played well for his win.

Shane Dwyer reflected this same attitude at a tournament at Yallourn when his opponent drove through the difficult last hole and was faced with a downhill shot over the track and amongst the tree roots. When his opponent pulled off the requisite miracle shot to birdie the hole and win, Shane was generous in praise.

Later on there was some consolation for Phil when he won a B Grade Championship. He did it tough too. By the sixteenth darkness had set in and his five shot advantage at the start had been whittled back to one by the close of play.

He always enjoyed Pennant and played for Warragul before joining Drouin. His competitive nature meant that he enjoyed playing against quality players. With a handicap at its lowest of ten, this often meant he had to compete against single figure players. This experience probably allowed him to complete two successive seasons undefeated in 1986-7. This last year very nearly provided the Club with its first Men's flag but unfortunately the Division 4 team had to settle for runner up. Incidentally this team contained a young Anthony Bambridge. To balance the books it also had a more mature Doug Clarke and an old tennis sparring partner of Phil's, Arnold Mills.

Over the years Pennant has declined in importance which Phil regrets. Once it was an honour eagerly sought after whereas now clubs often find it difficult to field teams. In 1992 we won a flag with a Division 6 team! Even five years ago there were 4 divisions. In 2012 there were only two although we had success with our Division 2 team. The decline in interest probably doesn't reflect a lack of pride in the Club so much as a reflection of how much more complicated our lives have become. Work and family commitments make that harder. Not many people today can afford the time to play two rounds on the one day at a neutral venue as was often the case in Phil's day. This was tough going. Phil remembers a Drouin player going to the 23rd for both rounds. That's a lot of golf especially as matchplay is mentally very draining.

Phil is still enjoying his golf. In 2013, teaming with David Leach, he won the summer Cup. There was no sign that day of the shank which a few years before had threatened to ruin his game. He certainly has lost distance with age but still hits the ball up the middle. Some of us would like to be able to do this.

He does have a pet hate though: ignorance of etiquette. When he started this was taught. Not only would senior players guide beginners but at the end of the round when everyone gathered in the Club rooms for presentation, reminders by the Captain could be issued. He would like to see more of that. He also regrets the dilution of important tournaments. If he didn't get to play 36 holes he felt cheated. More importantly, he saw the longer form of the game as fairer as luck doesn't play as large a part.

In the eighties he remembers an attempt to minimise that element of luck by modifying the handicap system. In stableford or par you pick up when you have run out of shots. This means that your handicap after that round does not necessarily reflect your performance. So, when playing stroke or stableford your handicap was weighted according to a special formula. We are still tinkering with the handicap system in 2013; somethings in golf never seem to change.

Finally, mention should be made of Phil's ability to talk and play golf at the same time. Mick Whitford could probably match Phil's ability to talk underwater but even he can't do it in Latin. Only one person ever got the better of Phil in this regard. Brad Bennett said not a word for the entire round until the very end when he asked Phil the time. Ever the gentleman, Phil gave it to him.

Written by George Shand